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ABSTRACT

This issue of the Focus series published by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) provides an overview of how all state prekindergarten programs in the SREB region are performing on three measures of program quality: (1) class size; (2) ratio of students to instructional staff; and (3) instructional staff qualifications. Findings indicate that of the 14 SREB states with state-funded prekindergarten programs in 2001-2002, 12 met or exceeded the recommended child-to-staff ratio of 10:1 and maximum class size of 20. Ten states require every lead teacher to have at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood; nine of those also require every teacher to hold state teacher certification. The two programs that had required teachers to have only the entry-level Child Development Associate credential, Delaware and Georgia, are both planning to increase their teacher standards. Several states give prekindergarten funds to districts, which can decide to offer programs directly or to contract with community providers. Only two of these, Florida and Virginia, allow community providers to use teachers who do not meet the same qualifications as school-based programs. The North Carolina legislature authorized and provided funding in 2001 to develop a program for at-risk 4-year-olds. The Tennessee legislature in 2001 authorized an expansion of its small prekindergarten pilot program but provided no funding. In West Virginia, districts must locate their own funding for the prekindergarten start-up year but the program is included in the regular funding formula for schools in subsequent years. A table delineates the maximum child-to-staff ratio, maximum class size, and minimum qualifications of instructional staff for each of the 16 SREB states. (KB)

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Southern Regional Education Board

January 2002

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Focus *on Quality:*

Prekindergarten Programs in SREB States

SREB

David R. Denton

The 2001 SREB report *Improving Children's Readiness for School: Preschool Programs Make a Difference, But Quality Counts!* reported on research from Head Start and nine state and local preschool programs. The research demonstrated that high-quality preschool programs can improve at-risk children's readiness for school. Five of those programs were state-funded prekindergarten programs in SREB states: Florida, Georgia, Maryland, South Carolina and Texas. This follow-up report provides an overview of how all state prekindergarten programs in the SREB region measure up in terms of three critical measures of program quality that were identified in the earlier report. (*Improving Children's Readiness for School* is available on the SREB Web site, www.sreb.org.)

High-quality preschool programs are the result of several important factors. Perhaps the most critical factors in improving the school readiness of at-risk children are class size and the number and qualifications of staff. Small classes and low ratios of students to instructional staff provide a supportive learning environment in which young children can get the individual attention they need. The maximum child-to-staff ratios and class sizes reported on the following pages for programs serving 4-year-olds should be measured against standards recommended by experts. Experts recommend a maximum class size of 20, with no more than 10 students per instructional staff member.

No such quantifiable standard exists regarding staff qualifications. However, the minimum staff qualifications in these state programs should be read with an understanding of the extremely complex and individually variable development of young children. Teachers who are prepared well in early childhood development and education are more likely to respond effectively to children's individual needs.

A climate of quality prevails

The SREB states overall stack up quite well when measured against the standards discussed above. Although the programs vary considerably in years of operation and in the percentage of target children served, the overall commitment to high quality is impressive.

Of the 14 SREB states with state-funded programs in 2001-2002, 12 meet or exceed the recommended child-to-staff ratio and maximum class size. Ten require every lead teacher to have at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood; nine of those also require every teacher to hold state teacher certification. The two programs that had required teachers to have only the entry-level Child Development Associate (CDA) credential — Delaware and Georgia — both are planning to increase their teacher standards, though not to the baccalaureate level.

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Indicators of Quality of State-funded Prekindergarten Programs for 4-year-olds in SREB States, 2001-2002[1]

SREB state	Maximum child-to-staff ratio[2]	Maximum class size	Minimum qualifications of instructional staff[3]
Alabama	9-to-1	18	**Teacher:** state teacher certification or an appropriate bachelor's degree; an early childhood associate's degree is allowed if qualified teachers are unavailable **Assistant teacher:** a CDA (Child Development Associate credential)
Arkansas	10-to-1	20	**Teacher:** state teacher certification or an appropriate bachelor's degree **Assistant teacher:** an associate's degree in early childhood or a CDA
Delaware	10-to-1	20	**Teacher:** currently a CDA; effective in 2003-2004, half of each site's teachers must have at least associate's degrees in early childhood **Teacher aide:** a high school diploma or GED
Florida*	10-to-1	20	**Teacher:** state teacher certification if the program is school-based or a CDA if it is community-based, with all required to take a 30-hour training course **Teacher aide:** a 30-hour training course
Georgia	10-to-1	20	**Teacher:** currently a CDA, rising to an early chiidhood associate's degree in 2003-2004 **Teacher aide:** a high school diploma
Kentucky	10-to-1	20	**Teacher:** state teacher certification **Associate teacher:** currently a CDA or comparable postsecondary credential; effective in 2002-2003, a state-certified teacher will be required for every 10 students
Louisiana	10-to-1	20	**Teacher:** state teacher certification; candidates with comparable credentials but no appropriate certification may be hired for one year if fully qualified teachers are not available, but they must pursue certification to be rehired **Other instructional staff:** not specified

Maryland	10-to-1	20	**Teacher:** state teacher certification **Teacher aide:** a high school diploma
Mississippi			There is no state-funded program.
North Carolina*			A program is under development.
Oklahoma	10-to-1	20	**Teacher:** state teacher certification **Assistant teacher:** qualifications are determined by local school districts
South Carolina*	10-to-1	20	**Teacher:** state teacher certification **Teacher aide:** a high school diploma or GED
Tennessee*	10-to-1	20	**Teacher:** state teacher certification **Other instructional staff:** a CDA
Texas	22-to-1	22	**Teacher:** state teacher certification **Other instructional staff:** none required
Virginia	8-to-1	16	**Teacher:** state teacher certification in school-based programs; community-based programs, a relatively small percentage of the total, are governed by state child-care regulations, which do not specify minimum qualifications for teachers **Teacher aide:** not specified
West Virginia*	11-to-1	22	**Teacher:** state teacher certification **Teacher aide:** not specified

* See page 4 for additional information on this state.

1 Some programs also serve 3-year-olds and may have different standards for each age group; 4-year-old standards were chosen for comparison because all states with prekindergarten programs serve that age group.

2 In most cases, child-to-staff ratios are based on one teacher and one aide or assistant per class. The exception is Texas, which requires only a single certified teacher for classes of up to 22 children.

3 State teacher certification requires at least a bachelor's degree plus teacher certification in an area appropriate to early childhood education. The Child Development Associate, or CDA, is an entry-level, nondegree credential administered by the Council for Professional Recognition and supported by funds from the federal government.

Several states give prekindergarten funds to school districts, which can decide whether to offer programs directly or to contract with providers in the community. Only two of these — Florida and Virginia — allow community providers to use teachers who do not meet the same qualifications standards that school-based programs must follow. (South Carolina was included in this category in *Improving Children's Readiness for School*, but South Carolina has required all prekindergarten teachers to hold state teacher certification since the program began in 1984.)

Florida was one of the programs highlighted in *Improving Children's Readiness for School* for having documented proof of the program's success in improving the school readiness of at-risk children. However, the legislative authority for the existing state prekindergarten program, which serves about 30,000 children, expired on Dec. 31, 2001, and direct state funding will cease at the end of the current school year. Under new school-readiness legislation, the funds previously committed to the program (as well as funds for most other readiness initiatives) instead will be distributed to county readiness coalitions. These coalitions will have great flexibility in deciding how to spend the funds and will determine the operating standards for programs they fund. (The separate migrant prekindergarten program, which serves about 2,500 children, will continue as before.)

In North Carolina, one of the two states currently without a state-funded prekindergarten program, the 2001 legislature authorized and provided funding to devleop a program for at-risk 4-year-olds. The More at Four pilot program will begin enrolling students in Fall 2002. (The acclaimed Smart Start program, which provides state funds to improve the quality and availability of child care, will continue.)

The Tennessee legislature in 2001 authorized a significant expansion of its small prekindergarten pilot program but provided no funding because of revenue shortfalls.

In West Virginia, a school district must find its own funding for the start-up year of a prekindergarten program. After the first year, the prekindergarten program is included in the regular funding formula for schools and essentially becomes a state-funded program.